Rabat under the Almohads

The ribat was used by the Almoravid Dynasty, but it was the Almohad Sultan Abd al Mumin who redeveloped the settlement in 1150, transforming it into a permanent fortress town with palaces, the main mosque which still stands, reservoirs, and houses for followers, and using it as an assembly point for the large Almohad army. However, it was his grandson Yacoub al Mansour who dreamed of making Rabat one of the great imperial capitals and who from 1184 carried out the most ambitious programme of development. He ordered an enormous city, surrounded by walls, to be built. These walls were probably completed by 1197, and ran along two sides of the city, broken by four gates, most notably the Bab er Rouah. A grid of streets, residential quarters, a covered market, public baths, hotels, workshops and fountains were built, along with a new gateway to the médina. A bridge to Salé, and its Grand Mosque, were also constructed. The most impressive monument from this period, the Hassan Mosque, was never completed however. Projected as the largest mosque in western Islam, little more than pillars remain. The vast minaret never reached its full height and remains a stubby tower. On Yacoub al Mansour's death in 1199 works were abandoned and Rabat then fell into decline. Parts of the city were destroyed in fighting between the Almohads and Merinids, to the point that Leo Africanus, visiting in 1500, found few inhabited neighbourhoods and very few shops. As Rabat declined under the Merinids, Salé prospered. The dynasty's most noteworthy contribution to Rabat was the funeral quarter on the Chellah site, with its impressive mausoleums, but even that eventually fell into neglect. It is impossible to know today to what extent the area within the Almohad walls - basically the core of the ville nouvelle - was actually built up.

Piracy and Andalucians

Rabat's fortunes revived in the 17th century. As maritime technology advanced and the Atlantic Ocean became important to international trade, corsairing, or piracy, boomed. For a time Rabat was the centre, with the notorious 'Sallee Rovers' more likely to have been based here than in present day Salé. (Robinson Crusoe was a fictional captive of 'a Turkish rover of Sallee'.)

Rabat also benefited from the flow of Muslims leaving Spain during the Inquisition. First rejected by Salé, the Hornacheros settled in the Rabat kasbah in 1609, and the other Andalucíans in the Rabat médina in 1610. The médina they settled in was considerably smaller than the city Yacoub al Mansour had envisaged, as indicated by the 17th-century rampart, which, when built, demarcated the extent of the settlement, and now runs between the médina and the ville nouvelle. The area beyond this rampart was used for farming, and most of it remained undeveloped until the French arrived. In the médina, the Andalucían influence is visible, notably in the street plan.

Fierce rivalry existed between the Hornachero and the Andalucían communities, both setting up autonomous city-states and the period between 1610 and 1666 was marked by intermittent strife between the three towns of the Bou Regreg estuary (Rabat, Salé and the Kasbah des Oudaïas). In 1627 the three were united under the control of the Hornacheros as the Republic of the Bou Regreg, a control against which the Andalucíans frequently rebelled, most notably in 1636. The Republic lost its independence in 1638. In 1641 the three cities were again united, and in 1666 when Moulay Rachid captured the estuary they came under the authority of the Alaouite Sultanate.

The principal background to these conflicts was the struggle for control over the profits from piracy. Rabat was especially popular with corsairs, many of whom had Mediterranean origins, because, unlike several other ports, it had not been occupied by Europeans.